

# Service with a smile

LAURA CARTLEDGE heads to a Rye B&B which can make a very special claim.

**B**ettina Wells, owner of an award-winning Rye B&B, believes 'guests don't just look for a bed for the night' when booking accommodation.

In fact, thanks to the age of the internet, visitors now do a lot more research before choosing a place to stay.

"I'll admit the hotel I stayed at in Barcelona was picked because it used to be a printing press, while my Bristol AirBnB booking had a lot to do with its 60s furniture.

However when it comes to Knelle Dower Studio B&B, which Bettina runs with husband Jonathan, there is another draw as it was named as a finalist in the AA Friendliest Bed and Breakfast Award.

"We knew absolutely nothing about it until the AA called us to congratulate us," reveals Bettina, adding that it was only while at the awards ceremony, held at the Landmark in London in May this year, that they learnt more.

"At the Landmark we found out that it is down to the AA inspectors to put forward nominees and the final decision is made by a panel of independent industry specialists," she explains.

"We were pleasantly shocked, we are a tiny B&B business with just one unit and to be considered on equal standings with the best B&Bs in the country is an amazing feeling of achievement!"

And rightly so, as it turns out the now stunning space 'was derelict and leaning at 45 degrees towards the field' when the couple came across it almost 30 years ago.

"Its restoration was the first thing we did to create an office space to work from," recalls Bettina, who adds how they came across the main property by chance.

"It is probably fair to say we were pretty much seduced by it. It is a beautiful building and it has a very friendly feel about it. The location is quite special too," she enthuses.

"The birdsong is fantastic, the buzzards hunt in the fields and at night the owls hoot from the tall pine trees surrounding us. It is unusual to hear a vehicle, just occasionally a tractor!"

It sounds too good not to share and offered the perfect excuse to play host, something the pair admit they relish.

"My late mother frequently visited us from Germany with her friends, usually as many as



we could possibly put up," Bettina smiles.

"We always enjoyed these occasions and after her death we missed the hub-bub and fun of visitors."

So, in 2011 with Jonathan giving up his day job and Bettina seeing the studio's potential they set about bringing it all together.

It is worth noting neither were new to the industry, and the venture combined Bettina's experience having worked for a German tour operator specialising in bespoke travel to the UK with Jonathan's skills acquired as a conceptual designer for the cruise ship industry.

This meant, just a year later, the B&B was

ready for launch.

So how would Bettina describe their vision, and the reality?

"We created the studio with one aim in mind; to make it as comfortable and welcoming as we could imagine – a place to unwind," she answers.

"We seem to have succeeded, many of our guests spend long hours in and around the studio."

Crediting the 'secluded location' as the reason it has an 'away from it all' feeling, Bettina adds it is 'a place where the pressures of life just fade away' while 'the fact that there are no other guests makes it truly unique'.

Something they worked hard to make the design live up to...

"We wanted to keep it traditional with a contemporary touch to match the beamed open-plan space, it has a kind of loft feel about it," explains Bettina. "Jonathan designed the layout and all the fittings.

"The furniture is a mix of antique and modern pieces, we decided not to follow fashion and trends but to create something with a timeless appeal," she laughs, "absolutely no shabby chic!"

Aside from the award, Bettina admits there have been 'so many nice experiences' and that a highlight for her is 'always reading the guestbook after departure or a new review as it gives that satisfying feeling of attainment'.

As for the title of 'friendliest', she states it is a 'lovely compliment and it is so fitting for the B&B'.

"It is the personal touch which makes guests choose a B&B over a hotel," Bettina reasons.

"Friendliest is not down to individual taste, like 'best' or 'quirkiest', it simply comes down to good customer care and providing all these little special touches that others might overlook.

"We try to make sure that our guests will feel genuinely cared for: We enjoy making stays with us memorable by attending to their individual needs. They are all different; some want to chat, get recommendations – others may not.

"All guests are special and the feeling that they are happy and enjoying their time in the studio is our greatest reward," she confesses.

"Some return year after year and feel more like friends than guests, which is always very nice and it makes work feel like pleasure, which is rare."